

TRANSACTION COSTS OF AGRICULTURAL LENDING
IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

by

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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews recent cross-country evidence on the costs of financial intermediation of about twenty banks in six developing countries: Bangladesh, the Philippines, Honduras, the Dominican Republic, Togo and Niger. The results point out the high loan administration costs of agricultural loans, particularly in specialized government institutions. More importantly, the bank's performance in loan recovery appear as a key factor in determining the effective costs of agricultural lending. A trade-off appears to exist between resources allocated to loan processing on the one hand, and loan recovery performance and effective costs of lending on the other hand. The analysis emphasizes the need to appropriately measure loan delinquency, and to reflect the expected loan losses in the accounting provisions of the institutions.

Transaction Costs of Agricultural Lending in Developing Countries

INTRODUCTION

Knowledge of the cost structure and production technology of financial institutions is essential for analyzing institutional performance and assessing the adequacy of financial policies. Bank managers need to carefully monitor cost indicators in order to evaluate the performance of their institution over time and in comparison to their competitors, and to assess the profitability of different bank services. Managerial decisions about expansion or contraction of bank activities, as well as the provision of new financial services, must be based on the knowledge of specific features of bank technology such as economies of scale and economies of scope.

Policy-makers, on the other hand, should consider the cost structure and technological parameters of financial institutions when deciding on policy measures that affect the financial system. The effects of reserve requirements, interest-rate ceilings, and branching regulations, among other policies, are conditioned by the ability of banking firms to adjust their operational procedures and resource allocation to the policy measures. More than one bank failure can be traced to inadequate policies that have either under-estimated the costs of providing certain financial services, or over-estimated the market potential of specific areas of activity.

This paper presents recent cross-country evidence on the costs of financial intermediation in developing economies. The countries included in the study are Bangladesh and the Philippines in Asia, Honduras and the Dominican Republic in Latin America, and Niger and Togo in West Africa. Since interest rates vary substantially across countries due to different monetary scenarios, the

comparative analysis presented here focuses on the non-financial costs incurred by financial institutions in these countries.

The following section presents a brief discussion of the main cost components and different methods considered in the country case studies analyzed here. The factors likely to affect the level and behavior of costs are highlighted, before presenting the empirical results of recent studies in about twenty banks of six developing countries in the third section. Some concluding remarks follow.

TRANSACTION COSTS OF FINANCIAL INTERMEDIATION

Non-financial transaction costs incurred by financial intermediaries may be classified into: (1), costs of mobilizing deposits and (2), costs of lending. The former correspond to resources (labor, capital, materials) utilized in handling deposits accounts, documentation, record-keeping, and issuing statements. Costs of lending refer to costs associated with loan processing, loan disbursement, monitoring, and loan recovery. Gathering information about potential borrowers, assessment of collateral and documentation are among these lending costs.

In addition to the (explicit) resource costs of lending, important consideration should be given to risk costs, i.e., the implicit costs and explicit losses associated with loan default. Almost without exception, accounting provisions for loan delinquency are unrealistic, and follow diverse and usually undisclosed procedures. This introduces serious difficulties into cost and performance comparisons across banks. An attempt to overcome these complexities is made in the following section.

Since some of the institutions under analysis are banks specialized in lending, the results discussed below refer to lending (non-financial) costs,

rather than overall intermediation costs. The methods used in generating the cost figures reported here fall into two categories: (i) econometric analysis of the cost function using pooled time series/cross-sectional data (Bangladesh, Honduras, the Dominican Republic); and (ii), cost-allocation exercises using accounting data for a given time period (the Philippines, Honduras, Niger and Togo). All studies, however, use comparable definitions of the cost variable and of the relevant cost indicators. When necessary, adjustments have been made to assure the validity of the comparisons presented in the following section, in spite of the difference in methods indicated above.

CROSS-COUNTRY COMPARISONS OF COST ESTIMATES

Several factors need to be considered in cross-country comparisons of bank costs. Two of these factors are highlighted here. First, the country's level (stage) of development determines to a great extent the degree of development and maturity of the financial system. It conditions the financial technologies available and/or applicable to the financial institutions. The stage of development of communications and infrastructure has an important impact on the costs associated with bank procedures, and defines the constraints under which the system must operate. In other words, the "degree of sophistication" of the financial system is closely related to the country's overall development position.

Second, the nature and extent of financial regulations affect intermediation costs in several ways. The availability, characteristics, terms and conditions, and effective rates of return of financial instruments are greatly determined by existing financial regulations, and by the ability and willingness of the monetary authority to enforce them. Different types and strengths of financial

regulations, along with differences in the country's overall monetary policy, are reflected in the degree of development of the financial system.

The countries included in the case studies analyzed vary in their level of economic development from US\$144 per capita in Bangladesh to US\$790 per capita in Honduras. Honduras also shows the highest level of financial development as measured by the ratio of M2 over GDP, the lowest being that of Niger. Bank density is extremely low in Niger where there is one bank branch for every 250 thousand inhabitants, while the highest bank density corresponds to the Dominican Republic with one branch per seven thousand inhabitants.

The results of cost studies undertaken over the last four years in the six countries are summarized in Table 1. As pointed out earlier, the comparison focuses on the non-financial costs of loan administration, since costs of funds (interest rates) vary substantially (in nominal terms) across countries, due to different monetary conditions. Costs associated with default (risk premia) are not included in Table 1; however, the importance of the default factor when comparing bank performances will be discussed later in this section.

Bangladesh banks show relatively low overall lending costs compared to the other case studies reported in Table 1. Even though the bank branches used in the Bangladesh case studies are primarily rural and agricultural loans predominate in their portfolios, average costs of lending fluctuate between 1 percent and 4 percent. This cost range is comparable to the average figures obtained for non-agricultural loans in other countries, which in turn appear substantially lower than agricultural loans.

With the exception of the Philippine National Bank (PNB), specialized government banks show high loan-administration costs in all countries. The low administration costs of the PNB can be partially explained by its large scale of

TABLE 1

Costs of Loan Administration Estimated in Selected Case Studies
for Agricultural and Non-Agricultural Loans. Average Costs
in Percent of the Loan Amount, by Type of Loan

Case Studies		Agr. Loans	Non-Agr. Loans	All Loans
		%	%	%
<u>Bangladesh^{a/}</u>	Agrani	-	-	2.9
	Bangladesh Krishi Bank	-	-	0.9
	Janata	-	-	2.6
	Rupali	-	-	3.9
	Sonali	-	-	2.0
<u>Philippines^{b/}</u>	Specialized Gov't. Banks			
	Philippines Natl. Bank	3.2	1.6	-
	Dev. Bank of the Philippines	23.5	11.8	-
	Land Bank of the Philippines	11.7	3.3	-
	Weighted Average	4.2	2.7	
	Private Banks			
	Sample Priv. Comm. Bank	1.6	2.7	-
	Sample Rural Banks	5.4	3.9	-
	Weighted Average	2.3	2.7	
<u>Honduras^{c/}</u>	Gov't. Dev. Bank	-	-	10.0
	Priv. Comm. Bank	3.7-8.4 ^{d/}	1.0-7.5 ^{d/}	3.4
<u>Dominican Republic</u>	Gov't. Dev. Bank ^{e/}	9.3	n.a.	9.3
	Gov't. Dev. Bank ^{f/}	8.8	n.a.	8.8
<u>Togo^{g/}</u>	Gov't. Dev. Bank	-	-	5.3
<u>Niger^{h/}</u>	Gov't. Dev. Bank	9.5	n.a.	9.5

Footnotes on next page.

TABLE 1

Footnotes

- a/ Meyer and Srinivasan, October 1987. Data base: branch-level records 1983-1984.
- b/ TBAC, August 1985. Data base: banks' financial statements 1983. Weighted averages calculated using the shares in total loans granted in 1983.
- c/ Cuevas, 1984. Data base: branch-level records 1970-1982.
- d/ Cuevas and Graham, 1984. Data base: branch-level records 1982, and field survey, 1983. Highest cost of agricultural loans correspond to foreign-funded supervised loans.
- e/ Cuevas and Poyo, 1986. Data base: branch-level records 1979-1983.
- f/ Cuevas and Poyo, 1986. Data base: branch-level records 1984-1985. Deposit mobilization activity started in 1984.
- g/ Cuevas, 1987a. Data base: bank records, 1985.
- h/ Cuevas, 1987b. Data base: field surveys, household level (1985) and branch level (1986).

operations based on relatively large loans to agribusiness and agricultural trade enterprises, a factor that may explain the low costs of the Bangladesh Krishi Bank as well.

As indicated above, a comparison of (non-interest) lending costs across banks of different countries should take into account two important factors: first, the overall "degree of sophistication" of the banks in question, and second, the different performance in loan recovery associated with the institutions under analysis. The first factor is clearly illustrated by the government development bank of Niger (The "Caisse Nationale de Crédit Agricole") which stands out as a very simple credit delivery system. In spite of performing a mere input delivery function, and without carrying out essential banking procedures of loan evaluation, monitoring and loan recovery, this bank shows the high administration costs reported in Table 1. The case studies in the other countries considered here are comparable in the sense that basic conventional lending practices are generally followed. Whether this is true for loan recovery practices is a question that the discussion below will help answer.

Performance in loan recovery appears strikingly different across the banks under comparison. Table 2 shows the past-due ratios reported in the different sources for agricultural loans (column 1) and calculates the risk premia associated with them assuming a homogeneous opportunity cost of funds of 10% (column 3)¹. Column 4 in Table 2 indicates the total agricultural lending costs resulting from this exercise, excluding the interest paid on deposits and borrowings and the transaction costs of mobilizing these funds.

¹ Note that past-due ratios are assumed to be a relevant indicator of effective loan default. This may over-estimate effective loan losses in some cases, and the degree of over-estimation may also be different across case studies.

TABLE 2

Cross-country Comparison of Non-Interest Agricultural
Lending Costs Using a 10% Opportunity Cost of Funds
to Calculate Risk Premia^{a/}

Case Studies		(1) Past-due ratio %	(2) Loan Admin. Costs %	(3) Risk Premia %	(4) Total Non- Interest Costs %
<u>Bangladesh</u> ^{b/}	Agrani	54	2.9	133.1	136.0
	Bangladesh Krishi Bank	29	0.9	49.1	50.0
	Janata	57	2.6	149.9	152.5
	Rupali	73	3.9	308.0	311.9
	Sonali	39	2.0	71.6	73.6
<u>Philippines</u>	Government Banks incl. PNB	7 ^{c/}	4.2	8.6	12.8
	Government Banks excl. PNB	7	17.6	9.6	27.2
	Private Banks				
	Commercial Banks	10	1.6	12.4	14.0
	Rural Banks	23	5.4	34.5	39.9
<u>Honduras</u>	Government Dev. Bank	35	10.0	64.6	74.6
	Private Comm. Bank	5	3.4	6.0	9.4
<u>Dominican Republic</u>	Government Dev. Bank ^{d/}	28	8.8	46.2	55.0
<u>Togo</u>	Government Dev. Bank	39	5.3	73.7	79.0
<u>Niger</u>	Government Dev. Bank	18	9.5	26.2	35.7

Sources: Same as Table 1.

a/ Computed using the formula

$$r = (d/(1-d))(1+a+f)$$

where, r is the risk premium

d is the default rate (assumed equal to the past-due ratio here)

a is the loan administration cost

f is the opportunity cost of funds, assumed 10% for all cases.

b/ Past-due ratios as of June 1985, taken from annual reports.

c/ Past-due ratio corresponds to the Philippine National Bank (PNB) and the Development Bank of the Philippines (DBP) taken together. The ratios for the Land Bank of the Philippines and separate ratios for PNB and DBP are not reported in the TBAC study.

d/ Only most recent study considered for this table.

The use of past-due ratios needs to be taken with caution. The usual way of computing these ratios, i.e. overdue balances over total loans outstanding, may bias the comparison across banks if the term structure of their loan portfolio is substantially different. Furthermore, the larger the share of long-term loans not yet due in the portfolio, the larger the downward bias in the measured past-due ratio.

With the foregoing caveats in mind, the last column of Table 2 provides a rough comparison across banks and countries that encompasses both transaction costs of lending and loan recovery performance. Past-due ratios of Bangladesh banks, and consequently total non-interest costs, appear visibly higher than almost all other banks included in the cross-country comparison. According to the figures, Agrani, Janata, and Rupali belong to the highest cost category. The Agricultural Development Bank of Honduras, the Agricultural Bank of the Dominican Republic, Krishi Bank and Sonali in Bangladesh, as well as the "Caisse Nationale de Crédit Agricole" of Togo comprise a second-highest cost category. Government banks in the Philippines (excluding the PNB), along with Philippine Rural Banks, and the government agricultural bank of Niger fall into an intermediate cost category. Finally, private commercial banks (in the Philippines and in Honduras) belong to the lowest cost group.

Perhaps the most important implication of the foregoing discussion is the need to pay close attention to the measurement and reporting of loan recovery performance. The comparison presented in Table 2 highlights the incidence of default rates in building a comprehensive performance indicator for banks' lending activities. An important component of the observed differences across banks and countries may be precisely a different definition of past-due ratios, and a different correlation of this measure with effective loan default losses (see note 1).

On the other hand, the low cost of loan administration found in some banks before considering the risk premia associated with loan default may indicate an insufficient amount of resources allocated to loan evaluation and loan recovery. Hence, loan administration expenses appear low in the books, whereas effective lending costs are strikingly high due to poor recovery performance. This suggests the existence of an important trade-off between the amount and quality of resources allocated to loan processing on the one hand, and loan recovery performance and effective lending costs on the other hand.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The comparison of lending costs in selected case studies in six developing countries highlighted the importance of considering loan recovery as an integral part of an overall indicator of lending performance. Furthermore, the analysis emphasizes the need to appropriately measure loan delinquency, and to reflect the expected loan default losses in the accounting provisions of the institutions.

Why is it that total lending costs, inclusive of risk costs, do not receive more attention from bank managers and policy-makers? Evidently, as underlined above, the explanation relies upon the distinction between the explicit nature of effective bank expenses (i.e., cash outlays), which do not include imputed costs due to expected loan default, and the economic concept of bank costs which does consider the opportunity cost of loan losses. While, in the short run, the management may be primarily concerned with covering operational expenses, in the medium to long term the neglect of loan recovery procedures as well as inadequate accounting provisions for loan default inevitably result in substantial bank bail-outs and reorganizations.

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